

## Fitness centers

So you have decided to join a fitness center. There are many options out there from the expensive, all-inclusive club, to the sport-specialized facility, to the bare bones workout facility.

First, consider what your workout goals are – to lose/gain weight, improve cardio, sport-specific training, or a combination thereof. If you are unsure of your goals an all-purpose facility may allow you to experiment with various classes and types of equipment.

### Visit and compare programs

Take the time to visit several centers to compare programs and facilities. Most facilities have regular drop-in hours when you can meet with a staff member, find out what types of equipment and programs are available, and tour the facility.

When choosing a facility, keep the following in mind:

**Location and Hours:** Is the club located near your home, office or other daily activities? Is it open at the times you would plan on exercising? When is it the most crowded? What about availability during holidays?

**Environment:** Will you enjoy spending time in the facility? Is the equipment in good condition and in working order? Are the floors, equipment and locker rooms clean? Is there entertainment available, such as televisions or personal music stations?

**Staff:** Are the staff friendly? Are they trained to do CPR, administer first aid, and use an AED? Are personal fitness trainers and/or nutrition consultants available? What qualifications or certifications do the staff members have?

**Equipment:** Do they have the equipment you are interested in using? Is it in good shape? How often is it updated or replaced?

**Amenities:** What type of extras does the facility offer: convenient parking, towels, a steam room and/or saunas, on-site childcare? Is there an additional cost associated?

**Reputation:** What do others say about the fitness center? Is the center in good financial condition? Is it well managed? Check with other members for their feedback.

**Membership:** How much does a membership cost? What are the membership options? Are there student or family rates available? Can you afford the program you want? Do you have the ability to freeze your account? What are your cancellation options? What refund rights, if any, do you have if you move from the area? Are there additional fees for specific amenities? Can you bundle personal training with membership options? Are there other facilities available for your use? What are the billing cycles and options? Review your membership agreement carefully to understand all company policies!

### Once you have made your decisions on a fitness center...

#### What fitness plan fits you?

Do not assume that a state-of-the-art mega gym with high membership fees are necessarily better for you than a smaller, more moderately priced facility.

Most centers have several membership plans. Costs per year for a new membership vary depending on the type of services desired. Lower cost introductory

specials may be offered for limited periods of time in an effort to promote enrollments. There may be a trial membership available at no cost.

Do not be persuaded to purchase an expensive long term program unless you are certain you will stay with it. Consider trying a short term membership first.

Examine each program by considering the down payment charge, the monthly fee and the cost of annual membership. These amounts will vary in different plans, so calculate the total costs and benefits before assuming a special offer is actually the best buy.

Ask current members about the program.

## **The pressure is on**

Consumers often feel pressured by persuasive sales techniques of fitness center personnel who usually receive commissions for the memberships they sell. Sales presentations may include emotional appeals and even scare tactics. Do not be intimidated by such methods. Do not be satisfied with evasive answers to your questions or verbal promises, which do not appear on a written contract. If a fitness center salesperson tells you something is part of your membership, they should be willing to write it into your contract.

Before signing a membership contract, review the details carefully. Make sure you understand your obligations to the facility, including the length of your agreement, billing procedures and cancellation

policies. Read the terms and conditions if you have a free trial membership. If you are required to sign a contract to use the trial membership, be sure you have an option to cancel should you not want to continue the membership.

## **You are protected**

The financial soundness of some fitness centers remains a consumer problem. Try to evaluate the financial soundness of a center. Some centers close within a short period of time or fail to open at all. A fitness center may appear prosperous but have no real assets or investments. If another company buys the facility you join, the new owner may be under no obligation to honor your contract. If a center closes and has no money, you may be left without a remedy. State law requires that fitness center contracts contain a three-day cancellation right so that new members can think about and cancel the membership if they wish.

The law requires disclosure statements in the contract of the full membership price and the cost of individual time payments. All contracts must also specify every major facility and service available in the membership and include any conditions or restrictions on their use. This includes a list of the locations members may use.

If any facility or service becomes unavailable at any time during the length of the contract, the consumer is entitled to choose an adjusted refund or a transfer of the unused portion of the

membership to another affiliated center. If you choose a refund, it is the center's responsibility to provide you with the adjusted refund.

A club cannot sell memberships of longer than two years' duration and it must have an expiration date. In addition, when the center has not been built, contracts must guarantee that the facility, service, or location will actually be available for use within six months.

If a center collects more than \$100 in advance of providing services, it is required to have a \$25,000 form of financial responsibility filed with the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection.

## **For more information**

For more information or to file a complaint, visit our website or contact the Bureau of Consumer Protection.

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